



CULTURE PROFILE

SOMALI BANTU: Yarey and Adey are **Somali Bantu** from Jubba Valley in southern Somalia.

Somali Bantu History & Culture

The Somali Bantu are a minority group in Somalia, a country largely inhabited by ethnic Somalis. Somali Bantus primarily live in southern Somalia, along the Jubba and Shabelle rivers, where they make their living as farmers. Most are descendents of people from various Bantu-speaking ethnic groups in what are modern-day Tanzania, Malawi and Mozambique who were brought to Somalia as slaves in the 19th Century.

Somali Bantu Communities in US

Most Somali Bantu converted to Islam but also have strong animist traditions. Bantus had little or no access to education in Somalia; younger refugees had schooling and some English classes in camps. Most adults arrive here without literacy skills and without English language skills. Most were unfamiliar with electricity and other aspects of modern urban and suburban living on arrival here.

By 2007, around 13,000 Somali Bantu been resettled to Salt Lake, Denver, San Antonio, and cities in New England. Minneapolis, Atlanta, Columbus, Ohio, and Lewiston, Maine also have significant Bantu communities. Young men travel to other states to compete in soccer leagues. Young women are still often married off early in arrangements made by their parents, with the groom's family paying the bride's family for the privilege. Some men keep more than one wife, citing justification in the Koran. Divorce is not unusual; Somali Bantu women as single parents are not uncommon.

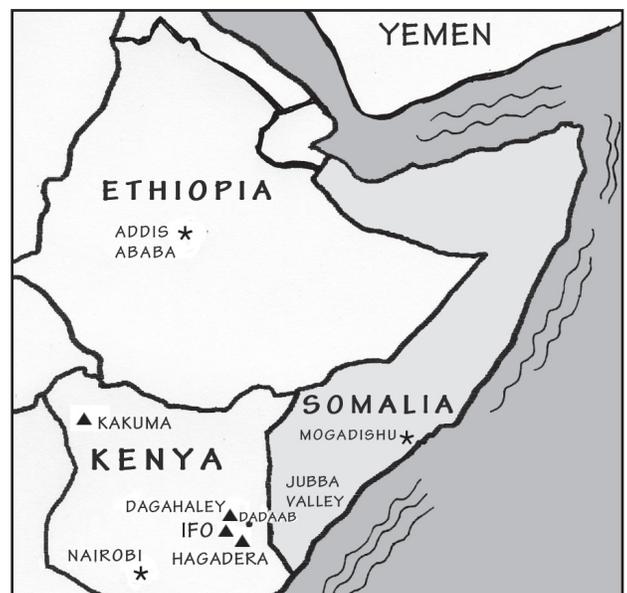
Civil War in Somalia

Civil war and conflict have been ongoing since 1991. As the backbone of agricultural production in southern Somalia, Somali Bantu had had large stocks of food and were subject to attacks when hunger among the Somali population increased. In the process of stealing food stocks, the bandits also robbed, raped, and murdered Bantu farmers, wreaking havoc on the Bantu farming communities.

In October 1992, the Bantu began to flee southern Somalia en masse for in Kenya. By January of 1994, an estimated 10,000 Bantu were living in camps there. Three main camps - **Hagadera**, **Ifo**, and **Dagahaley** (pop. 124,000 in 2006) are clustered in **Dadaab** in NE Kenya. **Kakuma** camp in NW Kenya is used for cultural orientation before resettlement in the West. Resettlement to US began in early 2000s. **Yemen** has also been a major host country for the Somali diaspora.

SOURCES

- **The Somali Bantu: Their History and Culture**, 2002. Published by the Center for Applied Linguistics. www.cal.org
- **The Somali Bantu Experience**, compiled by Colby College anthropologist Catherine Besteman. <http://wiki.colby.edu/display/AY298B/>
- **Rain in a Dry Land**, PBS documentary by Anne Makepeace (2006) follows two Somali Bantu families as they travel from Kenyan refugee camps to cities in the U.S.





CULTURE PROFILE

BURMA (MYANMAR): Max and Ma Ra Sul Bi and their extended family are from Burma

History & Cultures of Burma

Burma (Myanmar is the name preferred by Burma's dictatorship) is one of the most diverse countries in the world, with eight major ethnic groups and many smaller minority groups. Many refugees from Burma are from its oppressed ethnic groups such as the Karen, Karenni, Shan, Chin, Mon, and Rohingya. Burmans (the ethnic majority of Burma) also face considerable oppression in their country, whose totalitarian government has been compared to that of George Orwell's classic dystopia, *1984*. Bhuddism is the official state religion; people of other religions face discrimination and persecution. Some may identify more with their religious or ethnic group than with their national identity.

Civil War and the Democracy Movement in Burma

Many of Burma's ethnic groups have been fighting for independence since the British left in 1948. The Karen people have been at war with the Burmese Army for over 50 years, mainly in a region near the Thai border where the government's "Four Cuts" policy has meant whole villages being razed and forced evacuation for tens of thousands. Human rights abuses are rampant (vividly depicted in *Rambo 4*, the movie), in what is one of the most closed and longest running totalitarian regimes in the world.

August 8, 1988 was a pivotal point for the democracy movement in Burma. Major unrest prompted by food shortages and inflation led to a major uprising that is commemorated by veterans in the Burmese diaspora. It is also the year Aung San Suu Kyi stepped on to the political stage, taking a leadership role in the movement and carrying on the work of her father, revered General Aung San who was assassinated before coming to power in 1947.

Burmese Refugee Communities in Asia

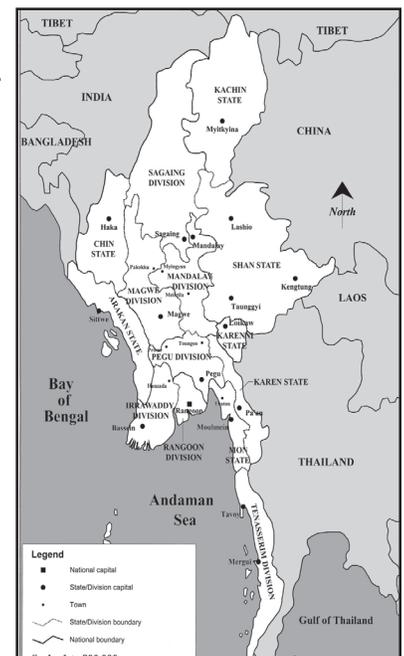
There are large camps of Burmese refugees along the Thai border, many that have been occupied for over 20 years. A whole generation of Karen youth were born and raised in these camps and have never seen their ethnic homeland. A large Rohingya community is housed in camps in Bangladesh. Urban refugees congregate in Delhi, Bangkok, and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Many arrive without official status and live precariously as undocumented illegal immigrants and suffer abuses in their host countries.

Burmese resettlement in the US

The Burmese are a small but growing percentage of Asian refugees. The most recent wave to arrive in the US began in 2007. Indiana hosts one of the largest communities in Fort Wayne (~3500), and the rustbelt town of Utica NY, is being revived by a sizable community of Karen refugees. As communities get established, they hold Burmese New Year celebrations in the spring, and commemorate the 8-8-88 uprising in August.

SOURCES

- **Finding George Orwell in Burma**, 2004. American journalist Emma Larkin sheds light on Burma's past and present.
- **For Us Surrender Is Out of the Question: A Story from Burma's Never-Ending War**, 2010. Mother Jones reporter Max McClelland "explores the world's longest-running war through her housemates, refugees who risk their lives documenting their government's secret ethnic-cleansing campaign."
- **Burma VJ: Reporting from a Closed Country**, a 2008 documentary of the September 2007 uprisings against the military regime.





Hmong History & Culture

The Legacy of the Vietnam War in Laos

Hmong Communities in US

SOURCES

CULTURE PROFILE

HMONG: Kay and her family are Hmong; she grew up in Laos and her children in Thai camps and in the US .

The Hmong are an Asian ethnic group from the mountainous regions of China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. They have long been a people of exile without a home country or government. Their expert needlework skills are found in traditional Hmong storycloths and richly embroidered clothing. Their oral language was first transcribed to a written one by missionaries in the 1950s.

Many Hmong converted to Christianity, but also maintain strong animist traditions. Hmong shamans' healing practices are beginning to be recognized by Western medical practitioners. Hmong had little or no access to education in Laos; younger refugees had some access to schooling and English classes in camps. Early arrivals here were village-dwellers and farmers unfamiliar with electricity, plumbing, and other aspects of modern urban living.

Hmong soldiers fought against the North Vietnamese and the communist-nationalist Pathet Lao during the Vietnamese War. General Vang Pao (now recognized as a leader of US-based Hmong) led a special guerrilla unit for the CIA in what became known as the "secret war" in Laos. As a result, Hmong people were singled out for retribution when the communists took over Laos in 1975 after the Americans pulled out. Tens of thousands fled across the dangerous Mekong river to Thailand seeking political asylum. The Hmong diaspora now includes thousands of refugees resettled since the late 1970s, mostly in the US but also Australia, France, French Guiana, and Canada. Others have been forced to return to Laos under UN-sponsored repatriation programs as the Thai government seeks to close its remaining camps.

The first wave of Hmong immigrants in the late 70s and early 80s settled in California and quickly established farming communities there. Reductions in state aid there and extended family ties led many to relocate to Minnesota and Wisconsin, which had also accepted large numbers of Hmong. Many went to work in factories to support large families. Hmong who arrived as children have since risen into professional positions, and it is not uncommon to find Hmong police officers, teachers, firemen, business leaders, and politicians. Today the Twin Cities is the hub of Hmong culture in the US. The movie *Gran Torino* depicts the lives of contemporary urban Hmong in Detroit.

- **Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora**, 2010 by Chia Youyee Vang, The first scholarly work to come from inside the Hmong community.
- **The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir**, 2008, by Kao Kalia Yang. Born in Ban Vinai refugee camp in December, 1980, she came to Minnesota in the summer of 1987 with her parents and older sister.
- **The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures**, 1998 by Anne Fadiman. Chronicles the struggles of a Hmong refugee family in Laos and their interactions with the health care system in California.

